HOME OF THE QUICK ANSWER

By Irvin S. Cobb

Drawings by F. Victor Hall

"At Least the Title Remains in the Profession," Said Wilson.

AN overenthusiastic worshiper at the shrine of Broadway once characterized that thoroughfare as the Great Bright Way, and supplemented the tribute with the explanation that, although he had traversed the streets and avenues and drives of the world, he had encountered on none of them the Gatling conversational give-and-take, the uppercuts of repartee, that prevail among the boulevardiers of Manhattan's electric lighted, pulsing path. "I venture," said this man in his burst of praise, "that, if you approached any Broadway personage in a casual, bromidic manner and remarked to him that it was a fine day, he would reply with a flash of wit. Repartee lives on Broadway. Broadway is the home of the Quick Answer."

Whether or not the enthusiast's attitude is justified may be an open question; but there are many instances of repartee chronicled to the credit of writers, artists, actors, dramatists, journalists, and others whose names are tacked on Broadway's door that give at least some foundation to the stand he has taken. And the particular stories in point, according to the best belief of the present writer, have never found their way into print.

FRANCIS WILSON was sitting in a group of actors at the Lambs' Club, a place that is essentially of Broadway, although not on it, on the night of last Fourth of July, when news came that the Hopes of the White Race had been cruelly dashed at Reno, Nevada, by Vaudevillain Jack Johnson. It was known among those present that Mr. Wilson had made some sizable wagers upon the defeated Mr. Jeffries, and they waited for the explosion.

"At least, gentlemen," said Wilson mildly, as he rose to go, "at least, we can congratulate ourselves upon one thing: the title remains in the profession."

A FEW years ago John Kendrick Bangs, the humorist, told a number of his Broadway literary confrères that he felt particularly elated over an order he had just received from Henry W. Savage, the theatrical producer, for the libretto of a musical comedy. The play, called "To-morrow Land" and renamed "The Man from Now," was produced a few months later. During the long period of rehearsals, so much of Bangs' material was eliminated and so much other material inserted in its stead that, when the curtain went up on the first night, not more than half a dozen of the original lines remained.

About a week later, a friend, meeting Bangs, asked him if he was writing any more plays for Savage.

"Yes," replied Bangs. "Only an hour ago I sent him five hundred blank sheets of paper and told him to go as far as he liked."

THERE is something in this story that savors of the dry wit of the late Charles Hoyt, the farce writer. Hoyt was leaning against the bar at a well known chophouse one night, when an actor who was notoriously stingy came in accompanied by two friends. The close fisted one and Hoyt were not on the best of terms; but the former was feeling a bit mellow himself and, moved by a sudden and almost unprecedented burst of generosity, he turned to Hoyt and said patronizingly:

"Charley, will you join us? I'm buying this drink."

"I certainly will," said Hoyt. "I am always glad to assist in the celebration of any truly historic occasion."

REX BEACH, the novelist, who spends considerable time each year on Broadway, also had an experience with a play—only his direct experience was with an audience rather than a manager. The day after Beach's drama, "The Spoilers," had fallen flat at the New York Theater, the author was lunching with several newspaper men at a hotel on West 42d-st. Alaska, where Beach had spent a lot of his time, was the subject of conversation.

"What is the coldest place you have ever been in?" asked one of the men.

"The New York Theater—last night," said Beach.

SOME of Broadway's best repartee-hees have been written, not spoken. There was Fred Thompson, the manager, who received a bad manuscript from a very young dramatist and sent it back with this simple note:

MY DEAR SIR.—I have read your play. Oh, my dear sir!

CORSE PAYTON, manager-actor, made the town laugh once after somewhat the same fashion. One of the afternoon papers was running a voting contest to choose a King for the annual carnival at Coney Island, and Payton was being boomed for the honor. It looked so much like victory for him that he announced the bill at his playhouse during the week of carnival would be "The Royal Family"—rather a neat thought, all hands agreed, especially as Payton had already stated that he would name his leading woman as Queen consort.

But at the eleventh hour the friends and admirers of John the Popcorn Man, down at Coney, rallied to his aid and rolled up such a tremendous volume of ballots for him that he won handily. Thereupon Payton announced that he had decided to change the bill and would appear, beginning Monday night, in "If I Were King."

IT was Payton also who sat one night in a group round a café table, leading the conversation in a rather loud tone of voice. A young man dressed in what the tailors call "snappy clothes for varsity men," listened awhile from a short distance, and then came over and solemnly handed Payton a dollar bill.

"Why this generosity?" asked Payton.

"I always pay to hear an actor perform," said the youth.

"Thank you," said Payton calmly; then, carefully tearing the bill in two, he handed half of it back to the other.

"What's that for?" asked the young man.

"Children half price," answered Payton gravely.

ONE actor, who insists that "repartee is largely a matter of repertoire," has for many years been regarded as one of the legitimate successors to the title of the late Maurice Barrymore as master of verbal give and take. This actor is Wilton Lackaye. Not long ago, Lackaye, in the course of an after dinner speech, said that "every big nation of the earth has its colony in New York, except the United States."

Subsequently a friend said to him that, while the characterization was clever, he should have confined his statement to Manhattan and should not have included Brooklyn.

"True enough," drawled Lackaye; "but when one speaks of New York no one ever thinks of Brooklyn as part of it, except people who live in Brooklyn—and Chicago."

RICHARD CARLE is another actor who carries a verbal punch up each sleeve. One night he was at dinner with two women members of his own troupe and a man, when a dazzling apparition at another table began to annoy one of the women with his persistent attentions. Finally she appealed to Carle. He called the head waiter over to him.

"There's a person at the next table yonder who has prospects of getting his face punched, which are growing brighter momentarily," said Carle, pointing out the offender. "Who is he?"

"Oh, sir," said the waiter, "that's Mr. Blank, the wealthy oilcloth man, you know."

"Is that so?" said Carle. "Well, you go over and tell the oilcloth man to play something on his linoleum.

A CHRONICLE of Broadway's men of wittiicism, however brief, would be incomplete without reference to John (or Jack) Barrymore, who, while on the witness stand during another man's lawsuit several months ago, said in reply to the question, "Are you an actor?" "Well, some say I am; others say I am not."

Barrymore one day met an acquaintance on Broadway who was vainly proud of the alleged fact that he bore slight resemblance to the late Richard Mansfield and liked nothing better than to be told so.

"Do you know," said Barrymore, "in one way you remind me very much of Mansfield."

Feigning surprise, the vain man asked, "How is that?"

"You wear nose glasses," replied Barrymore.

ONE afternoon Barrymore came down the Main Stem bearing under his arm one of those woolly white dogs that look so much like mops used in office buildings to wash windows with.

"Whose is it?" jeered a friend.

"Belongs to my sister Ethel," said Barrymore mournfully. "He's all dirty, and Ethel asked me to take him and make him nice and white again. But I've just found out that you can't wash this kind of dog with soap and water."

"Well, then, where are you taking him?" asked the scoffer.

"To a dry cleaner's," said Barrymore, and strode on.

IN the records of Broadway repartee the apt replies of Lew Dockstader, the minstrel man, occupy a long page.

Dockstader was returning from the race track late one afternoon.

"How much did you win?" some one asked him.

"Fifty dollars," he answered.

"On what horse?" asked the other man.

"On the clothes horse," replied Dockstader. He had won the fifty by having forgotten it at home in the pocket of a pair of trousers thrown across a set of stretchers.

ON another occasion, when playing cards with a party of friends, one of the men present asked Dockstader if he knew why they called it "poker."

"Because," he replied, "if you play with it long enough, you're sure to get burned."

A LITTLE man, his anger getting the better of him, once accused the big minstrel of being a liar.

"Well," pleasantly smiled Dockstader, looking down at the man, "what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to punch you!" exploded the other.

"If you do, you'll hurt your hand," said Dockstader, and the man had to laugh in spite of himself.

WILLIAM NEWMAN, diminutive manager of the Garrick Theater, while in the boxoffice was approached by a prospective ticket buyer one evening last spring with the query, "What's your capacity?"

"Pints or seats?" asked Newman.

A CARMINE nosed patron once insisted that he be given a seat on the aisle in the first row.

"The only aisle seat left for to-night," Newman told him, "is in the last row."

"But I won't be able to hear a word back that far," said the man.

"Then why don't you take this seat in the middle of the second row?" asked Newman.

"Must have an aisle seat," insisted the man.

"Well, I'll tell you what you do," suggested Newman. "You take this seat in the second row and carry a flask."

WHAT has become of Circular Joe Vendig, the bookmaker, since the tracks in New York all closed?" a stranger to Broadway asked of Mason

"Soap and Water Won't Wash This Dog," Said Jack Barrymore.